

Associate Conference Minister for Pastoral Transitions: Annual Report 2024

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(two last names; no hyphen)

This is my hope for this report: to tell my (extremely condensed) story of the last sixteen months while working within the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ. In the spirit of transparency and the necessity of honoring the relational nature of this work, I want to acknowledge the past and present colleagues whose techniques helped me to consider different questions when evaluating my work and inspired the creativity of infusing them into this document. I also want to thank Rev. Molly Carlson, our former Conference Minister, for her intentional weaving of all our gifts and talents (some not yet discovered) on staff so that we could become a more cohesive unit as the MLT. I don't just have colleagues. I have a family. And I wouldn't trade them for anything in the world. I pray that everyone gets to experience that at least once in their life. It's a game changer. It's a SOUL changer. Period.

For my part: To be an effective ACM for Pastoral Transitions, one must be well-versed in the art of transitioning. I think I have that covered. As stated, ad nauseum, the ethos of my work – the daily foundation of my work – is to be Pastoral to those in Transition. The title as it stands represents being focused on the constant work of clergy placement. My job, however, is to be focused on all those who feel the rippling effects resulting from (and in) clergy placement. Two very different things.

My report will cover the following topics: Personal Highlights, Experiences of Wholeness, A “Typical” Day, What “Keeps Me Up At Night”, A Few Emerging Priorities, Spirit Sightings, and My Prayer In This Moment.

Personal Highlights:

- Dedication of Christ Church Tamil (*January 2024*)
- Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (*February 2024*)
- The MID Event held at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Oak Park (*April 2024*)
- Prairie, Western, Eastern Spring Meeting @ Pilgrim Park (*April 2024*)
- Attending the Ordination of Rev. Ramona Bamgbose Gant (*July 2024*)
- **The naming of Rev. Dr. Terrill Murff as our Acting Conference Minister (*August 2024*)**
- Attending the TFAM (The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries) Convocation and participating in a clergy workshop with Bishop William Barber of The Poor People's Campaign (*August 2024*)

- Farewell Service for Rev. Molly Carlson at 1st Congregational DeKalb (*September 2024*)
- TPIRC Weekend (hosted and organized by Rev. Melody Seaton) (*September 2024*)
- **The return of Rev. Kathy Lawes from sabbatical (*September 2024*)**
- Lilly Grant Conference for Ecumenical Pastoral Work (*October 2024*)
- Brush Harbor: Clergy Retreat for Pastors of Color (hosted/co-founded by Rev. Michelle Hughes) (*October 2024*)

Experiences of Wholeness?

My surprises in ministry never cease to amaze. I am always caught off guard at how our Conference staff job descriptions are all so detailed and yet at the same time nowhere near comprehensive of all we do and all we are called to be. I am at my most whole when I am at my most vulnerable with the Ministry Leadership Team. It is during the times of misunderstanding, confusion, and the seeking of answers that I am consistently met with grace, collaborative thinking, and affirmation for who I am – just as I am. It is within the team, that even when we show up with “missing pieces”, we come together and all equal 100%.

What Does a Typical Day Look Like?

If anyone tells you that there is such a thing when working in ministry – please feel free to file that under “lies I’ve been told” in your mental rolodex. There is no such thing as typical. However, here are some factoids that may help people to better understand how I spend large chunks of my time throughout the week:

- **Search Committee Meetings:** 27 hours per week (on a light week)
- **Church Council Meetings:** 5 hours per week (I normally don’t stay the whole meeting but only long enough to present the information requested)
- **Clergy in Transition:** 15 hours per week
- **Reviewing/Editing/Posting of Church Profiles:** 2-3 hours per week
- **Partnership Meetings (Sibling Denominations, Community Groups):** 5 hours per week
- **Development of Presentations and Curriculum:** 8-10 hours per week
- **Emails:** Time in the Twilight Zone that is my inbox cannot be counted as the inbox never ends and time is but a mere construct that does not exist when I enter it. (No, really, I couldn’t possibly count the number of hours I spend sending/responding to emails – it’s incalculable.)

The above bullet points do not include: travel time to/from meetings, Pastoral Care conversations, pop-up calls/meetings, work within the larger denomination, meetings among the Conference Staff, Association Meetings, and other duties as necessary.

What “keeps me up at night”?

In terms of our churches: the vast urgency of “now” ...correction, the vast urgency of “yesterday” is of constant concern. The anxiety is palpable as churches reach out to me to speak about their vibrant past, their unnamed current relativity, and the work necessary to script their own future. It is in those moments, those moments when I realize that there is more that needs to be uncovered before embarking on finding the next Pastor, that I have the most discomfort. Not fear. Not angst. Discomfort. It is in the uncomfortable discernment of how to respond when I am asked my honest expert evaluation about the specific state of a local church that I spend a fair amount of time in cyclical thought. For it is then when I have to renew my covenant with the Church (big “C”) to always tell it the truth to the best of my knowledge. That truth ALWAYS comes with a cost. So, what “keeps me up at night” is not the questions that I am being asked – but rather – what it will continue to cost me to answer in truth and love. Every single time there is an ask – there is a cost for answering.

What are a few emerging priorities?

Should my workload begin to permit, I would love to engage in the development of the following:

1. Facilitation of Conference-wide workshops on Group Dynamics when serving on committees (namely, Search Committees – but solely limited to SC depending on leadership structure of the local church)
2. Integration of restorative circle techniques in situations where the members of committees require interpersonal work in order to foster healthy relationship
3. Cultural Competency for Search Committees who desire a wide range of candidates (Ex: BIPOC, LGBTQIA2S+, Differently Abled, Neurodivergent, and other Marginalized Voices)
4. Niche-Specific Mental Health Training and Care for Clergy (Mental Health Care for Interim Pastors, Mental Health Care for Solo Pastors, Mental Health Care for Pastors Recovering from Toxic Calls, etc.)
5. **ANYTHING RELATED TO THE LILLY GRANT!!!!**

Spirit Sightings?

I see Spirit every day! I see it when I encounter smiling faces on ZOOM that join me for 3-hour search committee meetings. I see it when I am finally able to make it to a meeting in person and see a set of open arms walking toward me to embrace me with a genuine hug of connection. I feel it when I am having thoughtful dialog with local church leaders on the unseen possibilities of tomorrow. I feel it when I am stopped short of making an apology for doing the best I can – but rather told that I am enough and reminded that within covenant grace freely abounds. I encounter it when I am able to witness all of the Conference staff name that there are not enough hours in the day but still be pushed to care for themselves because who they are (not just what they do) really and truly matters. I

cannot explain enough how only Spirit is responsible for the meeting and infusing of energies dedicated to seeing the Church continue to evolve and shine its brightest reflecting God's glory. On days when nothing else makes sense – it is always the Spirit that keeps us going.

What Is My Prayer in This Moment?

My prayer is that we, as the ILUCC, and as people who are responsible for the care of one another in this world – will work harder to learn and routinely speak each other's language. To dwell in the discomfort longer than we may desire knowing that God will continue to cover and surround us through the pruning and shearing. I pray that the hope I've witnessed in the fierce determination of people to not die in the many ways that death is possible – endlessly reverberates and penetrates the hearts and minds of those who believe that the best has still not been witnessed. I pray for a collective faith that allows room for personal moments of doubt – knowing that doubt is necessary in order to truly believe. Also, for a shapeshifting faith that remains strong enough to weather the daily storms in which it finds itself resulting in a more powerful presence of peace and security. My prayer is for covenant to reach beyond paper and historically approved words – and to become tangible through deliberate acts of relationship and intimacy development. Essentially, to affirm the divinity of humanity in one another by seeing God's reflection and proclaiming outwardly that, "It. Is. Good." Amen.